

# **The other love of Pancho Lazo**

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Photos: Ismael Batista Ramírez

• FRANCISCO "Pancho" Lazo Díaz is a weathered farmer, with lively eyes and rough hands, not tall, but very talkative, who has been married 40 years to Sabina Pérez Montano, a love that produced two children Yoandry and Yanet.

But this tough man living in the municipality of San Juan y Martínez, located some 25 kilometers west of the city of Pinar del Río - 180 kilometers west of Havana - unabashedly professes another great love, rooted deep in his heart: tobacco farming.

Pancho Lazo, as everyone in Quemado de Rubí calls him, is recognized as one of the best shade-grown tobacco farmers in the province. His plantations reflect this region's ancient tradition of sowing and cultivating the aromatic leaf, going back even before the Spanish conquest, in the Vueltaabajo area which contributes the greatest portion of tobacco used in Cuba's celebrated hand-rolled cigars.

The national and international press covering the 19th Habano Festival (February 27-March 3), the largest international event focused on premium cigars, sought out Pancho Lazo to learn about the origins of tobacco farming, and see firsthand how the leaf becomes a cigar, a tangible symbol of Cuban culture since the time of the island's original Taino people.

We were able to appreciate his vigorous plantations shaded with fine cloth, which, he explains, "produce a more delicate and larger sized leaf, just right to serve as the capa, the outer wrapper of brand name cigars."

His farm is affiliated with the credit and services cooperative bearing the name "5th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba," and includes more than 50,000 tobacco plants growing across 1.5 hectares. At this time, Pancho Lazo is immersed in the second harvest of the year, with annual production of 225 tons.

In this past 2015-2016 season, hard hit by inclement weather, heavy rain in particular, Pancho Lazo was obliged to call upon all his knowledge and perseverance to meet, and surpass, his contractual obligations of shade-grown tobacco, saying, "This is a time when a man cannot step back, he must impose himself, leave the sweat of his brow in the field. He must have a lot of love for what he does."

Such an outlook has made this *guajiro* one of the industry's leaders, an example and someone other growers consult regularly, above all the youngest. He has no qualms about sharing his experience, expecting nothing in return.

Of the 1,925 tobacco growers in San Juan y Martínez, only 267 work with shade-grown varieties of wrapper leaves for exported cigars. Renowned within this smaller group is Pancho Lazo, who has devoted

22 years of his life to tobacco and its mysteries.

He explains that not all growers take on the task of planting shade-grown leaves which sell for higher prices but present greater challenges, as compared to varieties grown unprotected, under the sun, used for the interior wrapping, or binder, and the filler of a cigar.

"Tobacco takes a great deal of care, from the very beginning of the planting, but the cultivation of shade-grown tobacco is much more difficult to carry out, it's like the bride's gown..."

"I'm never far from the plant, I talk to her, touch her; before I go to bed, I check on her and touch her again. You have to be in love with this plant to be able to get the desired results."

Journalists had many questions about the strategies he uses to achieve such laudable results, but the answer was short and precise, "Give the plant what it needs, at the right time, not before or later."

To our astonishment, he offered a master class about planting shade-grown tobacco as if he were conversing with one of the workers he employs on his farm, "The seedling is planted, and seven days later, it is watered, so the little plant lives, then we hoe around them, in what is known as *tape de palito*, and fertilizer is applied to the roots.

"Between the 18th and 20th day, a second hilling is done to support them and allow for watering (mounding soil around the stalks, leaving a row of seedlings in a bed alongside furrows for irrigation). The cloth is placed on the seventh day, but not too high, because, if you do, the leaves won't come out fine... what makes the tobacco leaves fine is the cloth.

"Once the cloth is in place, all the cultivation work is done, the staking of the plants to prevent a sudden gust of wind or heavy rain from destroying them. At 35 days, the stem tip is removed, what we call the button, so the plant starts to develop leaves, and doesn't continue growing taller.

"After 45 days, the ordered harvesting of leaves begins, so the curing of the plant is even. The leaves are removed two by two, more is not permitted. It isn't a continual picking process; the plant must be allowed a recuperation period of three or four days, and then we do another picking.

"If it rains, you have to wait for the plant to reestablish itself, since as the rain washes the leaf, it is weakened. The harvest must start after the 45th day and not go beyond the 80th, and according to the good eye of a picker."

The expressions of admiration were unanimous.

"I have never considered leaving the tobacco fields. It's here inside of me," he said, pointing to his chest, "inside of me."

#### A FAMILY AFFAIR

Pancho Lazo inherited his love for tobacco and its traditions from his father Pascual, from whom he learned the secrets of the soil, "I've had this taste for growing tobacco since I was a boy, and I have passed it on to my children and grandchildren. We are in tobacco because we love tobacco, and I devote all my energy to it," he said, emphasizing that this is undoubtedly a family affair.

"I have my relief, I've trained my wife and children, a boy and a girl; they know what tobacco is, they work with me. My son-in-law has been working with me for 14 years. He came from the central provinces. Everyone around me is capable of following the family tradition, even my two grandchildren, five and 13 years old, are already on the road to loving this plant.

"The tobacco harvest begins in November and ends around February or March; the rest of the year we plant other crops," he adds.

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Pancho Lazo explains that raising good tobacco involves many steps, much time and effort. He even grows his own seedlings, which requires 30-40 days. In August and September he prepares the cloth to provide the shade needed to obtain quality wrapper leaves.

No less important to him is caring for the soil, one of the treasures of this region, along with its traditions and the growers who have made San Juan y Martínez Cuba's tobacco mecca.

"We have to take care of the land, we cannot abuse it, we have to fertilize with a lot of organic material and animal manure. I plant lots of greens and corn to incorporate nitrogen into the soil naturally, and reduce the use of chemical fertilizers this way.

"Things don't always work out. Last year, the rain affected us a bit, but we held on, took on the challenge, and didn't let these obstacles defeat us.

"This year the weather is better and I think we'll have an excellent harvest, with good yields."

Experts agreed with the experienced campesino. The year began with great weather for tobacco, which augurs well for a bountiful harvest and high yields - good news for the national economy and lovers of Cuban cigars around the world.

Agronomist Juan Miguel Hernández Martínez, adjunct director of the Hermanos Saiz tobacco company agreed, telling *Granma International* that the municipality of San Juan y Martínez committed to a plan for the 2016-2017 season based on planting 4,335 hectares, and that, by the end of January, some 4,400 were under cultivation. The additional area planted reflects the enthusiasm of growers, given the favorable weather conditions,



Pancho Lazo, who has devoted 20 years of his life to growing tobacco, proudly displays his fine leaves, ready to be harvested from the plants that are taller than he is.



One of the first steps in curing tobacco leaves is stringing them two by two with large needles, and then placing them on wooden rods 4 or 5 meters long, called *cujes*. These are hung on wooden stands called *barrederas*. Some 100 *cujes* can be strung during a good workday.



In Pancho's curing house nothing is left to chance. Workers pay close attention to the humidity and temperature, opening and closing the doors as needed.

which have not been seen for five or six years, Hernández said, recalling that 25% of all tobacco grown in the country is produced in San Juan y Martínez, and that these growers were determined to "pull a thorn" from their hearts, after the heavy rain and poor harvest of last year.

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Francisco "Pancho" Lazo's face lights up when he says that he will leave his bones among

the rows of tobacco, insisting, "As long as I have the strength, I'll be in the field alongside the tobacco."

This love for Cuba's emblematic crop makes him a continuator of a long tradition in Vueltaabajo, home of another legendary tobacco man Alejandro Robaina (1919-2010), who produced wrapper leaves as well, and was recognized as Cuba's greatest during his lifetime with the honor of having a brand of cigars named after him: Vegas Robaina. •